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## REGIMES OF TRUTH AND PSEUDO-ENVIRONMENT: FROM EPISTEMIC CHAOS TO EPIDEMIC CONTAGION

### *Abstract*

People “live in the same world, but they think and feel in different ones”. In his book *Public Opinion* (1922), Walter Lippmann uses these words to develop the notion of pseudo-environment. The latter is crucial if we have to understand in what contexts, with what forces and by what coordinates a process of continuous cognitive simplification – a so-called “non-truth” – is publicly created in a relevant and influential form, and subsequently becomes truth.

According to Walter Lippmann, the “real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance between people and their environment”, and the pseudo-environment is an evolutionary trick, organized to withstand the pressure of increasing complexity.

Lippmann’s work was published in an era of “analogical pseudo-environments”. Over ninety years have passed since then. We now live in the digital age and in a world of “digital pseudo-environments”. One might question, therefore, whether the American scholar’s view remains valid. What, in specific terms, are the global implications of the proliferation of environmental niches in relation to new media?

My answer to this question is affirmative: Lippmann’s thesis is still valid, but it should be reversed. The digital pseudo-environment is not a shelter to the increasing complexity of the world. It is a complex, algorithmically mediated cage, which seeks to reduce complexity to banality. Engaging in human relations is no longer a process of evolution, but rather a process of involution.

### *Keywords*

Communication; information; disinformation/misinformation; regime of truth; environment; pseudo-environment; Walter Lippmann; Michel Foucault; journalism; media studies; post-truth.

It is to Walter Lippmann’s work that we owe, among other things, the notion of the *pseudo-environment*. The *pseudo-environment* is a key concept to our understanding of the processes of formation and deformation, construction and implosion of that public opinion to which the American writer dedicated, in 1922, an inescapable and crucial study<sup>1</sup>.

Lippmann, however, during his complex intellectual path of discovery, had already embraced the notion of *pseudo-environment* two years prior to the publication of *Public*

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<sup>1</sup> W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922. Lippmann’s work has been placed in context, both biographically and in relation to the political and geopolitical scenario, in G. Dessì, *Walter Lippmann. Informazione/consenso/democrazia*, Rome: Edizioni Studium, 2005.

*Opinion*<sup>2</sup>. This was in a work that was significantly dedicated, even in its title, to the double link between liberty and information: *Liberty and the News*<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. NEWS AND TRUTH

While Lippmann's analyses are strictly limited to the printed word, it is generally considered that they are also applicable to more evolved media contexts, and in particular to that of digital media. The *link between liberty* (understood in both its formal and its concrete sense) and *information* (as a precondition for the concrete action of this liberty) is particularly significant.

By concentrating on certain preponderant thematic nuclei (*pseudo-environment*, *pseudo-facts*, scenarization, retro-performativity, reactivity, adaptation), it becomes possible to reformulate, in our own times, questions which will retain their validity even in a context strongly dominated by the digital media. A context where – in line with Lippmann's thought – error and falsehood, “as in a polar game”<sup>4</sup>, are co-participants in a reticular process and not a mere conflict. This process, by enabling the inclusion of opposites, has the result of redefining their regime of truth, reconfiguring its sense and possibly even renewing its rules.

News and truth, Lippmann observes, are not self-evidently the same thing, but the co-implicate each other<sup>5</sup>. The function of news is to signalize an event, constituting it as such,

[...] the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act. Only at those points, where social conditions take recognizable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincide<sup>6</sup>.

The proximity, or the distance, between these two “bodies” defines the manner of man's adaptation to, or alienation from, his environment. An adaptation (or alienation) that takes place, in any case, by means of mental fictions or images and via the construction of a *frame* which encloses these images in a coherent order. The *pseudo-environment* is this *frame*.

<sup>2</sup> It is curious, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has noted, that Lippmann's work dedicated to public opinion does not, in the first instance, have much to do with public opinion. In Noelle-Neumann's view, Lippmann's definition of public opinion belongs to the few weak passages in the book (E. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For further details, see M. Ferri, *Come si forma l'opinione pubblica. Il contributo sociologico di Walter Lippmann*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2002; V. Lozito, *By Walter Lippman. Opinione pubblica, politica estera e democrazia*, Rome: Aracne, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> W. Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920.

<sup>4</sup> L. Voltolin, *Lo statuto veritativo dei media digitali. Una riflessione a partire da P. Ricoeur e W. Panzenberg*, Assisi: Cittadella editrice, 2017, 27.

<sup>5</sup> When Reginald Aubrey Fessenden placed himself before a microphone, in Brant Rock radio station, Massachusetts and, grasping his violin, gave vent to the notes of *O Holy Night*, few people realized what was at stake. It was Christmas Eve, 1906, and Fessenden was giving the first radio broadcast in history. As well as playing the violin, the enterprising inventor, son of a Church of England minister, read a verse from St. Luke's Gospel (2:14). That “Glory be to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of goodwill” inaugurated a new direction in human communications. In Greek, *evanghélion* means “news”, so Fessenden's choice had a certain consistency in the context of what Christophe Türcke has called the axiom of the logic of news (C. Türcke, *Erregte Gesellschaft. Philosophie der Sensation*, München: C.H. Beck, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 358.

## 2. MAN WITHOUT ENVIRONMENT

Already in *Liberty and the News*, as well as in the more detailed *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann was moving away from the then current – and today still more recurrent – formula for interpreting the crisis in western democracies as a linear consequence and simple effect of a combination between individual disillusion and institutional corruption. The opposite of truth, at public level, is not simply lies and falsehood. It is lies and falsehood and something worse: man.

Lippmann wrote:

I do not agree with those who think that the sole cause is corruption. There is plenty of corruption, to be sure, moneyed control, caste pressure, financial and social bribery, ribbons, dinner parties, clubs, petty politics. [...] And yet corruption does not explain the condition of modern journalism<sup>7</sup>.

His diagnosis was a different one and the reference to “modern journalism” is anything but extemporaneous. Lippmann’s diagnosis, therefore, was not concerned with the great and controversial question of the white collars, but with a way of doing things. In particular, it touched upon the practice and constitution regimes of truth<sup>8</sup> in a context strongly marked by a media presence that used to be described, in the 1920s, simply as “journalism”. A large part of *Public Opinion* is dedicated, not to ethics or to deontology, but to the journalistic practice of constructing *pseudo-environments*.

This is why the crisis of western democracy is, for Lippmann, a crisis of both the means and the message. It is a crisis of the environment in which the processes for the formation of causal links and the transmission of the substantiating circuits surrounding it are increasingly asymmetrical.

Thus – wrote Lippmann – “the present crisis of western democracy is a crisis in journalism”<sup>9</sup>. This statement, apparently naïve and refutable if taken out of context, is disarming where it succeeds in penetrating directly *in medias res*, locating “in the circumstances” a highly remote question. What, in a complex system, binds with a double link information, performativity and the *retro-performativity* of this information? What links regimes of truth and conditions of possibility and the exercise of what is, and will remain, the theme central to his thought: liberty?<sup>10</sup> We cannot found liberty of opinion upon an opinion for this reason, observes Lippmann:

A useful definition of liberty is obtainable only by seeking the principle of liberty in the main business of human life, that is to say, in the process by which men educate their response and

<sup>7</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> In a lesson of 6 February 1980, Michel Foucault defined a *régime de vérité* (*regime of truth*) as follows: “I propose to call regimes of truth. By regime of truth I mean that which constrains individuals to a certain number of truth acts, in the sense I defined last week. A regime of truth is then that which constrains individuals to these truth acts, that which defines, determines the form of these acts and establishes their conditions of effectuation and specific effects” (*On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980*, edited by Michel Senellart, general, editors: François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, english series editor: Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 112). For considerations on regimes of truth in the digital context, cf. B. Stiegler, A. Rouvroy, “Le régime de vérité numérique”, edited by D. Diminescu and D. Wieviorka, *Socio*, 2015, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. F. Regalzi, *Walter Lippmann. Una biografia intellettuale*, Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2010, 83.

learn to control their environment. In this view liberty is the name we give to measures by which we protect and increase the veracity of the information upon which we act<sup>11</sup>.

The *liberty-truth link* was already made clear in Lippmann, then, as early as 1920, in *Liberty and the News*. Liberty is an adaptive process through which men educate themselves to control their own environment by constructing niches of sense that allow than an indirect access to reality.

But liberty, as a process, also concerns all those measures “by which we protect and increase the veracity of the information upon which we act”, not only by modifying and controlling our environment, but by constructing new ones. It is precisely within this frame that Lippmann locates the notion of *pseudo-environment*.

According to the thesis that Lippmann was to develop in the first chapter of *Public Opinion*, dedicated to “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads”, men remodel the coordinates of *the world* through *their own* world, in a succession of ongoing cognitive simplifications founded on *pseudo-facts*.

### 3. RETRO-PERFORMATIVITY OF FACTS

These *pseudo-facts* are ultimately related to cause-effect links modulated by verisimilitude and by a continual recomposing of elements of factual veracity and non-veracity, rather than by the logical pairing of true-false. They are subjectively increased, moreover, by a sentiment-impulse of conformity and adhesion to the *pseudo-environment*. A few decades later, this thesis was to be verified through experimentation and defined by Leo Festinger with the name of *cognitive dissonance*<sup>12</sup>.

*Pseudo-facts* develop and proliferate in *pseudo-environments*, cognitive and behavioral niches, until, as a result of persistently assuming a publicly relevant and determinant form, they are transformed into self-evident truths and orient uncritical human action:

The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the terrorist, can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information. But where all news comes at second-hand, where all the testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths, and respond simply to opinions. The environment in which they act is not the realities themselves, but the pseudo-environment of reports, rumors, and guesses<sup>13</sup>.

Lippmann was never to separate, in a Manichaean manner, true and untrue, falsehood and truth. Following on from the psychology of William James, Lippmann spoke, in fact, of *fictions* or *mental fictions*<sup>14</sup>, that is to say representations of the environment fabricated by the individual to a greater or lesser degree, with greater or lesser awareness, and with a greater or lesser capacity to conserve the mnestic trace of the original fiction. The individual has no direct experience of these representations, yet he reacts to them *as if* he had experienced them, and so undergoes them and feels their effects as those of truth.

When speaking of fictions, Lippmann intends to account for a series of representations of the environment produced by the individual. These range from hallucination to

<sup>11</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, California: Stanford University Press, 1957.

<sup>13</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 54-55.

<sup>14</sup> W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890.

crystalline scientific patterns, from calculus to decimal points. Insofar as it is the product of active imagination, a fiction may be notably true to reality and – Lippmann observes – provided we are able to take into account its degree of truthfulness, the fiction is not misleading. The intrinsically paradoxical structure of this reasoning is that nobody – if not the weak and precarious figure of the journalist – can guarantee this adherence. In a *pseudo-environment*, facts are always and in any case such – and are true – only *a posteriori*. The individual's entire behavioral conduct can ultimately be interpreted as a reaction to this *pseudo-environment* of the media. It is an adaptive process carried out through practices of ongoing adherence to truths that are coherent with the *pseudo-environment* and its survival, but are potentially dissociated from any factual truth.

The use of fictions is necessary, since

The alternative [...] is direct exposure to the ebb and flow of sensation. That is not a real alternative, for however refreshing it is to see at times with a perfectly innocent eye, innocence itself is not wisdom, though a source and corrective of wisdom<sup>15</sup>.

The stimulus-response pattern occurs according to a “triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action”:

The analyst of public opinion must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action. It is like a play suggested to the actors by their own experience, in which the plot is transacted in the real lives of the actors, and not merely in their stage parts. The moving picture often emphasizes with great skill this double drama of interior motive and external behavior. Two men are quarreling, ostensibly about some money, but their passion is inexplicable. Then the picture fades out and what one or the other of the two men sees with his mind's eye is reënacted. Across the table they were quarreling about money. In memory they are back in their youth when the girl jilted him for the other man. The exterior drama is explained: the hero is not greedy; the hero is in love<sup>16</sup>.

An individual's reaction is based, therefore, not on a fact, but on a complex relationship between what is believed or known about that fact and, as a consequence of its scenarization, what is felt *in* that fact and the image that has been produced *of* that fact. This results in an evident relationship of *retro-performativity*<sup>17</sup> which, by confirming the *pseudo-environment* retroactively, making it “true”, enables the growth of a state of perceived certainty in place of the uncertainty that would arise from the explosion of the *pseudo-environment*. The *pseudo-fact* reconfigures the truth of the media-created *pseudo-environment* in which it is contained.

Every representation of the *pseudo-environment* gives rise to a *re-representation* that operates on the initial representation, reinforcing the regime of truth perceived through an ongoing “[...] triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action”.

<sup>15</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> The concept of *retro-performativity* had been developed in particular by J. Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, London-New York: Routledge, 1997 and A. Appadurai, *Banking on Words. The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

## 4. ACCESS TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

The real environment, Lippmann observed, is always too much for man. It is “too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance between people and their environment”<sup>18</sup>, while the *pseudo-environment* – and hence the role of journalism, as serial producer of *pseudo-environments*, as well the vehicle for epidemic-scale circulation of *pseudo-facts* – constitutes an evolutionary trick with which to withstand the pressure of growing complexity and uncertainty.

The reduction in epistemic chaos, ensured by the presence of *pseudo-environments*, nevertheless frees the terrain for potential epidemic chaos, because in these same *pseudo-environments*, the *pseudo-facts* may give rise to *pseudo-* or *post-truths*, in a play of potentially infinite and destructive retro-performative mirrors. This is the issue that is clearly at stake for Lippmann, and it is from this that his insistence on the figure of the journalist derives.

To traverse the world, men must have maps of the world, but the surrounding environment – Lippmann further comments – is too complex, too rich in permutations and combinations. Men therefore have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before they can orient themselves and orient their own actions:

We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world. Their persistent difficulty is to secure maps on which their own need, or someone else's need, has not sketched in the coast of Bohemia<sup>19</sup>.

The notion of *pseudo-environment*, developed in an age of analogic pseudo-environments, may significantly help us to understand in what contexts, with what forces and via what coordinates, a process of ongoing simplification can take on a publicly relevant and determinant form, producing *effects of reality* and of truth<sup>20</sup>.

In her work dedicated to the “spiral of silence” (*Die Schweigespirale*), Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann<sup>21</sup> points out that one of Lippmann's principal contributions to the social sciences was that of identifying the *stereotype* (to which the third part of *Public Opinion* is dedicated) as a cultural means for transporting public opinion and, at the same time, as a defensive pattern for the group against a context, the environment, that is too rich in stimuli and complexities.

As a means of epidemic contagion, in Lippmann's perspective, the stereotype ensures circulation within the *pseudo-environment* of mental images and words that are able to construct authentic media-induced *pseudo-worlds*. It was Lippmann who imported the concept into the world of the social sciences, lifting it from the typographical context in which it had been coined at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It would appear that the art historian Bernard Berenson<sup>22</sup>, who corresponded with Lippmann at that time, also played a role in choosing the term. Influential, too, was the economist Graham Wallas's concept of “painted boxes”.

<sup>18</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> I borrow the notion of the *effet de réel* as developed by Roland Barthes

<sup>21</sup> E. Noelle-Neumann, *Die Schweigespirale. Öffentliche Meinung – unsere soziale Haut*, Zürich-München: Piper, 1980.

<sup>22</sup> B.D. Riccio, *Walter Lippmann: Odissey of a Liberal*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1994, 60.



Under such conditions, opinions and concepts are crystalized in an emotionally charged stereotype, and these stereotypes establish themselves in the *pseudo-environment* now conceived as a *Zwischenwelt*, a middle-world. Anyone who could control the stereotypes, noted Lippmann, who appositely entitled the first chapter of *Public Opinion* “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads”, would have control over men. No less power would belong to anyone who could implant mental images, *mental fictions* or path-directing and consumer orienting stereotypes in other people’s minds.

When Patrick Le Lay, then Director of the mainstream French television channel TF1, declared in 2004 that the purpose of his channel was to sell portions of “the human brain’s available time to Coca Cola”, was he saying anything different? Questioned on the theme, the former Director of TF1, Patrick Le Lay, stated:

Now if an advertising message is to be perceived, the telespectator’s brain must be available. Our transmissions’ vocation is to make it available: that is to say, to entertain it, to relax it in order to prepare it between two messages. What we sell to Coca Cola is the available time of the human brain [...]. Nothing is harder to achieve than this availability. This is where permanent change is found. We need to permanently seek programs that go, to follow the fashions, to surf in the trends, in a context where information accelerates, proliferates and is trivialized<sup>23</sup>.

We need to insist strongly, without polemics, on the steps that mark out this process of colonization “du temps de cerveau humain disponible” and the grafting by the media of hetero-produced images. How much truth is possible for human brains that have become *pseudo-environments of themselves*?

## 5. MANUFACTURING CONSENT

In Lippmann’s view, the *pseudo-environment* of information still depended partly upon a selection and, ultimately, a barrier. In order for a *pseudo-environment* to superimpose itself or take the place of an environmental reality, procedures were needed for the reduction, transformation and prior manipulation of that reality. Propaganda, Ministries of Information and the figure of the *press agent*, all of which feature largely in Lippmann’s considerations, fulfil this role.

Today, on the contrary, rather than a barrier, we should be thinking of a filter or a porous membrane: a point where narrative techniques and power devices come together, giving rise to that practice of scenarization that has radically extended the *pseudo-environment* of information. The *pseudo-world* has devoured the real world<sup>24</sup>, linking it in reticular-digital form but, at the same time, provoking rifts of a new kind. Vertical rifts, within the self, in place of horizontal rifts.

For this reason the poet Andrea Zanzotto, with implicit reference to Lippmann’s image, likened the *pseudo-environment* to a greenhouse<sup>25</sup>. But not a greenhouse where men cultivate “opinions”, create stereotypes and project images to simplify the world. Quite the reverse: a greenhouse in which men are cultivated. Men produced by stere-

<sup>23</sup> H. Maler, “Patrick Le Lay, pour TF1, vend du Coca light à Télérama”, *Acrimet*, September 8, 2004, <http://www.acrimed.org/Le-Lay-TF1-vend-du-temps-de-cerveau-humain-disponible>.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Y. Citton, *Mythocratie. Storytelling et imaginaire de gauche*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. A. Zanzotto, *Eterna riabilitazione di un trauma di cui s’ignora la natura*, Rome: Nottetempo, 2007.

otypes, holograms of their own images. Power devices are always *bio* power devices, devices that can carve out, internally and externally, the genetic and cultural *bios*, but in ways that are often scarcely perceptible – like “the stuffy air in the greenhouse” that may annoy us at first, but which we breathe without noticing after a few minutes – since it is these that constitute the *pseudo-environment* in which we move. The impression is that the media-created *pseudo-environment* is today unable to reduce the complexity; rather, it increases it, twisting and tangling it, depriving the world of an environment. It transforms the world into a set of media-induced micro-worlds.

Human beings have always – and hence the continuing relevance of Lippmann’s insight – organized themselves and their practices inside a space that is culturally delimited, circumscribed, isolated and enclosed by a symbolic border “that makes a world within the world”<sup>26</sup>. Men have always organized their activities inside closed symbolic spaces, but while the cultural-symbolic delimitations of the past were easily defined and located, on the basis of well-defined cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious systems, which the means of communication could neither cancel nor evade, today’s technological innovations and digitalized communication techniques are easily able to break down those thresholds.

The digital *pseudo-environment* is a network of niches without a threshold, a micro-world that illusorily protects by linking rather than isolating, and illusorily orients by disorienting. At what cost?

## 6. VOICES IN THE MIRROR

The notion of the *pseudo-environment* therefore superimposes on that of the *echo-chamber*, where truth is not only simulated but reflected, aggregated, polarized and ultimately disaggregated, though without conserving the orienting force of Lippmann’s stereotype. An *echo-chamber* is a media-created space, circumscribed on the web, where exchanged ideas are reciprocally confirmed<sup>27</sup> and confirm, as an effect of retro-performativity, the *pseudo-environment* of the exchange<sup>28</sup>. The individuals who enter this space do nothing but echo each other, relating “truths” to each other that confirm their respective expectations. This is a very specific way of self-constructing consent and consumption within the process of *parrhesia*.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we witnessed a *manufacture of consent* capable of operating on the *hardware* of our society. This was the case of propaganda, first studied by Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, at the same time as Lippmann was giving shape to his concepts. But – and this is a case that Lippmann himself examined – we also witnessed a manufacture of consent which affects the *software* by means of an immense power to produce scenarios within which the individuals act. The hyper-modern decline of public speaking has been produced more in the stuffy “air” of this *synopticon* form of liberty (where one is watched and controlled by the many) than in the panoptic structures (where one watches and controls many) of the old-style *manufacture of consent*.

<sup>26</sup> M. De Carolis, *Il paradosso antropologico. Nicchie, micromondi e dissociazione psichica*, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008, 25.

<sup>27</sup> On *echo-chambers*, cf. W. Quattrociocchi, A. Vicini, *Misinformation. Guida alla società dell’informazione e della credulità*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> On the filter bubbles offered by social media as *pseudo-environment*, cf. Z. Bauman, D. Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation*, London: Polity, 2012, 108.



This is one of the reasons for which these new regimes of truth, emptied of truth, have taken such a widespread and molecular hold. It induces us to reflect more on the order and disorder of public speech than on direct ideological manipulations. It is in these *pseudo-environments* (we may think of the notion of the “*filter bubbles*” of web search engines) that the forms of life that exist within them are determined. It is here, moreover, that is installed that *government by the living* that is as necessary for the system of techno-financial capital, governed by algorithmic stereotypes, as is exploitation of the capital itself. As Foucault reminds us in *La volonté de savoir*, management of the accumulation of men and, consequently, the production of individual and collective subjectivity, is the fundamental issue at stake in this capitalism<sup>29</sup>.

The spiral of financial and techno-nihilist capitalism is apparently implemented in the context of a colossal – because efficacious – exploitation of everything – life, death and waste. Not even parrhesian antagonism and desertion can escape it. “Telling it like it is”, “declaring it out loud” and “stating it without hesitation, at whatever risk” – all classic forms of parrhesia – are exploited, made to fit a media-integral scenario where social processes and psychic processes are increasingly entwined, marked down from the beginning by the fact that they are “posterior”, never original. The truth is what it is simply because it has been made to circulate, implanted in the media circuit. Its regime, first and last, is circulation. In this sense, it can strictly be called post-truth.

#### 7. POST-PARRHESIA: TELLING THE TRUTH, BUT TO ALL AND NONE

The postmodern *pseudo-environment* is a place of post-parrhesian “cultivation”. The post-truth that inhabits it is “post” because, while it wears the mask of truth (in Lippmann’s terms, adherence to facts that it helps to bring out and bind in a system of links), it is a truth that can be stated without danger to the declarer. In parrhesia, the danger arose from the fact that the truth asserted and declared was damaging to the hearer. Parrhesia is always a game between the person telling the truth and the person receiving it. It may clash, annoy, induce tragic reactions, but always within a horizontal-circular process where “telling the truth” excludes the other fundamental feature of the process of parrhesia: the truth is told, not just to anyone but to those in power. It remains a truth, but a truth of which the telling does not expose the teller, except to a display of narcissism, because there remains nobody willing to listen to it.

Apart from the question of opposition (saying no, telling the truth to those in power), there remains, enlarged and strengthened, what Michel Foucault noted as another feature of parrhesia: confession<sup>30</sup>. Confession before those able to exercise censure. In this sense, the only power invoked by parrhesia is not the ascendant power of courage, that of saying the truth to those in power, but the descendant vertical one of the power that sanctions<sup>31</sup>, with positive or negative reward, the degree of confession and exposure to the *synopticon* decree<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> M. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*, London: Penguin, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. C. Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the ‘Confessing Animal’*, London: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> M. Foucault: “the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth. [...] Western man has become a confessing animal” (*The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*, 59).

<sup>32</sup> The concept of “synopticon” (surveillance of the few by the many) was identified by T. Mathiesen, “The Viewer Society: Foucault’s ‘Panopticon’ Revisited”, *Theoretical Criminology*, 1, 2 (1997): 215-234.

At the same time, this truth is “post-” because it is capable of infinite self-reproduction and voiding. All that remains of parrhesia is the infinite exposure of the individual caught in the *synopticon* device of the *digital pseudo-environment*. There remains its infinite confession, productive not of absolution, but of infinite blame. In this sense, the regime of truth in the digital age appears to be post-parrhesian.

The *post*, Jean-François Lyotard explained, is characterized by an “ana-”-type movement: analytical, anamnestic, anagogic, anamorphic. A movement that, in some ways, re-encompasses those relations with the truth, as broadly understood, that structure our relations with what is real. A movement tending, not to the *come-back* or to the *flash-back*, but to the ongoing elaboration, constantly accelerating, of an initial oblivion<sup>33</sup>. Not just absence of origin, then. Nor even non-memory of its foundation – where the circular flight of hermeneutics would represent the *ultima ratio* of metaphysics that are unable to appear as such nor call themselves such. Nor yet a stripping away of the regimes of truth, but contortion in oblivion of even the memory of this absence.

Even the body, the crucial element of parrhesian practices, if it is to exist in the midst of this whirlpool, must be translated into codes, visible within and without, stereotyped in the net and in algorithmic logic. It must therefore be placed in one of the many evaluation systems that ultimately impact upon subjectification and the self. The “I” becomes an I-commodity that is terrified of invisibility. It is for this reason that it exposes itself, confesses itself, declares what is apparently the truth. At the same time, invisibility becomes the matrix of insignificance. Carlo Strenger has rightly spoken of the “fear of insignificance”<sup>34</sup>.

## 8. THE GLOBAL I-COMMODITY MARKET

This new species is *homo globalis*, ramified with his prosthesis in a digital and pseudo-environmental network that isolates him just as it continually defines and redefines his identity<sup>35</sup>. As a socially isolated being, *homo globalis* can count and so exist only if he is recognized<sup>36</sup>. He can be present only insofar as he is seen, translated into an image, by one of the many systems for classifying and digitalizing the self. This man counts, not as a worker, not as a property owner, but as an asset or commodity with a contact-value or a presence-value, the rating of which goes up or down from one moment to the next. He counts as goods exhibited in the *Global I-Commodity market*<sup>37</sup>.

On media and panopticism, cf. A. Doyle, “Revisiting the Synopticon: Reconsidering Mathiesen’s ‘The Viewer Society’ in the Age of Web 2.0”, *Theoretical Criminology*, 15, 83 (2011): 283-299; Z. Bauman, D. Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance*, 63-69 (Bauman: “‘synopticon’, in my reading, is a sort of ‘DIY panopticon’”, 63).

<sup>33</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *Post-Modern Explained for Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, translated by Don Barry et al., edited by J. Pefanis and M. Thomas, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 80.

<sup>34</sup> C. Strenger, *The Fear of Insignificance: Searching for Meaning in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> “Technique has penetrated the deepest recesses of the human being. The machine tends not only to create a new human environment, but also to modify man’s very essence. The milieu in which he lives is no longer his. He must adapt himself, as though the world were new, to a universe for which he was not created. He was made to go six kilometers an hour, and he goes a thousand. He was made to eat when he was hungry and to sleep when he was sleepy; instead, he obeys a clock. He was made to have contact with living things, and he lives in a world of stone. He was created with a certain essential unity, and he is fragmented by all the forces of the modern world” (J. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, translated by John Wilkinson, with an introduction by R.K. Merton, New York: Vintage Books, 1964, 365).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, London: Polity, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Strenger, *The Fear of Insignificance*, 23.

The individual becomes one with the global pseudo-environment that decides his value, quantifying him or reducing him to a *commodity*.

From this derives the fear and panic of not counting and not being present, where being and being present radically coincide. The obsession with the mirror and with the echo of one's own "voice of truth" become an anxiety to recompose the self together with an image of the self that are no longer produced – here lies the drama – by breaking down, but by proliferation and hybridization of differential axes. The *pseudo-environment* has become a cage of ether that, greenhouse-like, clutches complexities in a vice, without lightening their weight upon an individual who has become dissociated from the self, from the world and from reality.